What Can We Learn from Korea-Japan Normalization?

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Fifty-five years ago, on June 22, 1965, the foreign ministers of South Korea and Japan signed the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea to formally normalize the bilateral relationship between the two countries.

It had been a long, complicated road to get to that point. Negotiations on the treaty had started thirteen years before, in 1952. They had sputtered along since. Ten years later, as close as three years before the treaty was signed, the State Department was assessing in a briefing memo that "prospects for early normalization . . . are not bright." It noted the array of difficult issues requiring resolution between South Korea and Japan, from fishing rights to sovereignty over what the paper referred to as "an inconsequential islet." But, it emphasized, the "Korean claims for compensation, based on Japanese occupation from 1910 to 1945," was the central dispute, and "if it can be settled, the other issues can be settled."

Some observers will rightly take this fifty-fifth anniversary to reflect on the substantive legacies of the normalization treaty – how it created the formal framework for the bilateral relations and cooperation between Japan and South Korea today, or on the opposite side of the spectrum, how it defined the battlefield in Korea-Japan disputes for over half a century in resolving some issues, resolving some in a way that left the door open to future controversy, and simply declining to address others. But one legacy that deserves more attention is the precedent that the normalization treaty set for how Korea-Japan deals come to fruition – and the lessons it holds for progress between the two countries has so often been unsustainable.

The Korea-Japan normalization process was finally made possible after thirteen years by a very narrow alignment of domestic and geopolitical factors: a strong Korean leader able and willing to prioritize practical benefits of cooperation with Japan, outside pressure from the United States, and Japanese conservatives seeing Korea as strategically indispensable.

It is easy to overemphasize one or both of the first two factors.

It certainly wouldn't be hard to correlate Syngman Rhee's virulent anti-Japanese sentiments with the lack of initial progress toward normalization; or Park Chung-hee's 1961 rise to power in South Korea with new momentum in the long-stalled normalization talks given his

practical interests in leveraging the treaty to generate national growth and maintain U.S. support. But these explanations by themselves don't quite cut it, especially since they don't account for the fact that Prime Minister Chang Myon's democratic government, which succeeded Syngman Rhee's authoritarian regime and was ultimately overthrown by Park Chung-hee, had made normalization a priority. In fact, a 1961 U.S. government assessment observed that "just prior to [Park's] coup the Japanese and Korean governments had begun to make progress in their efforts to reconcile their differences."

It also wouldn't be hard to assume that U.S. pressure was the reason South Korea and Japan came together. But that explanation by itself, too, isn't sufficient given that the negotiations still took thirteen years. The documentary record shows that U.S. officials were highly sensitive to the complex politics around alliance management in both Japan and South Korea, and sought to nudge the normalization process along without triggering a backlash through more direct intervention. "Both sides resent any American role that that could be interpreted as interference – almost any overt U.S. role would be so interpreted by Communist propaganda and the Japanese Left," assessed a 1962 background paper for an NSC meeting, "at the same time, each side is constantly seeking to invoke U.S. influence and money against the other in a complex tangle of issues where a misstep for the U.S. would be very easy and could be quite damaging." By 1964, the U.S. Embassy Tokyo was advocating in a cable that while the United States had "played a game of sincere friend of both sides, encouraging them to settle differences but not wishing to mix in ourselves," it was time for a "more positive U.S. role." Still, the contemplation of more proactive U.S. pressure on the normalization talks was a reflection of the fact that they had made progress and were close to the finish line. It was not the cause of the two countries reaching an agreement.

The critical ingredient that effectively leveraged new Korean leadership and U.S. influence to conclude the normalization treaty was the support of Japan's most conservative political leaders and factions. On the Korean side, Syngman Rhee's authoritarian regime had been replaced by South Korea's Second Republic in 1960. But the Japanese Prime Minister who was in charge from 1960 to 1964, Hayato Ikeda, did little to take advantage of the situation and drive the normalization talks forward. Ikeda – whom Charles De Gaulle famously derided as "that transistor salesman" – was focused on economic growth and favored a "low posture" that aimed not to rock the boat at home and abroad.

Below the formal level, though, the foundation for progress was being laid. By 1961, a pro-South Korean group within Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party was strongly pushing for progress on Japan-Korea normalization negotiations. Led by former Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi, the group included major LDP faction leaders and members – including Shigeru Yoshida, Eisaku Sato, Kakuei Tanaka, and more. Kishi in particular was a nationalist and revisionist who had no qualms about papering over war crimes but envisioned Japan playing a stronger, more independent regional role. The group saw normalizing ties with South Korea as key to Japan playing a stronger role in the Cold War.

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Increasingly, too, the LDP and Japanese business constituencies were also seeing both economic and political value in investing in South Korea. Ichiro Kono, a major LDP faction leader, reportedly told Ikeda that the Korea's need for money was "the greatest opportunity since the end of the war to solve the Japanese-South Korean problem."

Even as Ikeda's modest approach kept formal progress between Japan and South Korea slow, informal parliamentary and business interactions were thus growing and a critical consensus in favor of prioritizing normalization was taking hold in key LDP factions. When Eisaku Sato, Kishi's brother and a key player in this consensus, succeeded Ikeda as Japan's prime minister in 1964 – combined with efforts by Park Chung-hee and the United States – normalization was finally made possible. Most critically, Japan's foreign minister and lead negotiator, Etsusaburo Shiina, made a visit to Seoul to deliver an apology that helped pave the way for the conclusion of the normalization negotiations. That couldn't have happened without Sato and other Japanese conservatives viewing some form of apology as a necessary move in service of Japan's strategic objectives. U.S. pressure to make helpful gestures to move normalization forward and a receptive leadership in Seoul were also critical elements.

At the end of the day, the stars had to align between Korean leadership, Japanese ruling party conservatives, and U.S. diplomats to make the normalization treaty happen. No one or two of these factors in isolation could have led to the conclusion of the normalization treaty. In the fifty-five years since, almost every agreement between Korea and Japan has also required the alignment of these three factors. Most significantly, and ironically, because of the dominance that the LDP has managed to cement in Japanese politics over those decades, these agreements have often continued to require at least the tacit acquiescence of the conservatives most likely to embrace the sort of historical revisionism that has fueled many Korea-Japan disputes.

This continuing salience of right-wing voices in Japanese domestic politics has been a huge factor in why Korea-Japan relations has been so unstable, ensuring that moments of reconciliation rely on a temporary strategic calculations rather than lasting shifts and why Japanese apologies are constantly called into question soon after they're made. And it raises questions about whether a U.S. approach to Korea-Japan relations that emphasizes reconciliation is really the right fit for an era in which the foundation for further reconciliation is fragile.

Reporting on the signing of the normalization treaty in 1965, UPI explained that it "put a formal end to fifty years of mutual enmity." In retrospect, normalization wasn't a formal end to anything, but a formal start to a nuanced, complicated bilateral relationship that has seen – and will continue to see — both cooperation and enmity. The normalization treaty was not a treaty to end all treaties. The more Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington recognize it was just a beginning – and reflect on the lessons of how it was negotiated to generate more sustainable outcomes – the more likely it will be that the next fifty-five years will be better.

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